

## To save overseas flights, Port of Portland pulls out all the stops

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July 08, 2009, 5:21PM



Lufthansa airlines is ending its transAtlantic service to Portland International Airport in mid-September.

**Handing an airline a \$3.5 million check is an unusual deal, but the one-time money may save crucial links to the outside world**

In ordinary times, the Port of Portland has no business writing million-dollar subsidy checks to any of the airlines that serve PDX, even those operating the precious few international flights serving the region.

But these aren't ordinary times. High fuel prices and the economic collapse are threatening to take Portland back to the days where its airport, one of the nation's finest, was "international" only in the sense that it offered flights to Vancouver, British Columbia.

Deutsche Lufthansa airlines contacted the Port last week and announced that it was halting its flights to Frankfurt, Germany, after Sept. 12. Meanwhile, Delta Air Lines, which recently took over Northwest Airlines and its flights serving Portland, quietly approached Port officials and warned that its nonstop overseas flights from PDX to Tokyo, also were threatened.

On Wednesday, the Port Commission responded, voting unanimously to pay Delta \$3.5 million to continue the nonstop Portland-Tokyo service at least through next May 31. The payment will come from the Port's capital improvement fund, which includes money from the sale of properties, not from taxpayer dollars, or airport revenues.

It is illegal for ports to use airport revenues to subsidize airline operations, a federal law meant to ensure that airlines cannot coax airports into bidding wars for their services. Bill Wyatt, executive director of the Port of Portland, says that the Port's payment to Delta isn't likely to be repeated here or anywhere else.

This is a one-time risk worth taking. The nonstop flights to and from Tokyo's Narita Airport have a long, and mostly successful history in Portland. It's a vital link to a host of Asian countries -- Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, China -- hugely important to Oregon's largest and most successful companies, including Nike, Intel and other high-tech firms.

The Port's relatively small investment, reportedly paired with some private commitments in the Portland area, will help carry the flights through the low-travel winter months into next spring. As the economy improves, business and tourism travel should rebound, and by this time next year, there's reason to believe that the transPacific flights can again stand on their own.

Give the Port credit: This is a bold attempt to preserve the few nonstop international flights that a small market like Portland can support, especially in an economic downturn where airlines are pulling planes out of airports all over the world to reduce costs and save money wherever they can.

Delta also operates a nonstop flight between Portland and Amsterdam, and shares the same Boeing 767s that fly the transPacific route to Tokyo. It seems clear that by helping shore up the Tokyo flights, the Port is also protecting the transAtlantic flights, too.

Of course, it is disappointing to lose the Lufthansa flights, which arrived with much fanfare and excitement six years ago. Lufthansa is a terrific airline company, and the flights linking Portland to Frankfurt are convenient for business travelers and tourists. You can quickly reach almost anywhere in Europe from Frankfurt.

But with the Port's agreement with Delta, there is at least a fighting chance that Portland can hang onto the Tokyo and Amsterdam flights until the economy improves. The Port has done all it can. Now it is up to Portland travelers. Wyatt points out that about 40 percent of people who fly from PDX to Europe and Asia choose not to take the direct flights, but connect to other airports to save a few dollars.

Here's the reality: When it comes to Portland's few international flights, it's use them or lose them. The Port is doing everything it can to save these flights. You should get on board, too.